

Equitable, Effective and Meaningful Grading Practices for Students with Disabilities/Exceptionalities

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“Good to Know” Information about Grading

- Continues to be one of the most debated educational practices.
- Research suggests variation in grading systems and practices among districts, schools, and even classrooms.
- Focus of grading research in regular education has focused on more systematic practices (less teacher judgment) and more linkage to learning standards.
- “Passing grades” are often cited as evidence that a student is making “satisfactory progress,” and is therefore in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

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Anatomy of a Grade

Report Card Grades are Comprised of Elements

- Quizzes, tests, or exams
- Research or laboratory reports
- Projects or exhibits
- Portfolio
- Notebook or journal
- Oral presentation or performance
- Homework
- Class participation
- Work habits and neatness
- Effort
- Punctuality of assignments

(adapted from Guskey and Bailey, 2001)

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What to Expect when Discussing Grading with Your Teacher or Administrator

- Grading policies are required to include only an explanation of the scale (e.g., A = outstanding), and the schedule for reporting to parents.
- Most teachers are uncomfortable with grading any students' performance, and may therefore be reluctant or defensive when questioned.
- Different perceptions of the purpose or importance of grades.

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Advocating for Students with Disabilities Regarding Grading

- Advocacy is usually initiated following very low or failing grades for one or more marking periods.
- Advocacy should involve asking questions and making sure the student understands the expectation "up front."

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Critical Knowledge Areas for Parents/Advocates

- What is a "fair" way to grade?
- How accommodations or modifications affect grading.
- When can/should special grading procedures be implemented?
- What types of grading "adaptations" are available and how should they be used.

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Perspectives on What is "Fair?"

- Maintaining equality
 - Everyone receives the same opportunities and same rewards
- Maintaining equity
 - Opportunities and rewards are proportionate to input or performance
- Meeting needs
 - Opportunities and rewards matched to student needs

From Welch (2000)

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What are Accommodations?

Purpose of Accommodations

- Reduce or minimize the "interaction" of the student's disability with classroom expectations
- Allow valid assessment of content learning that is not affected by disability
- Should not result in reduced expectations
- Do not require different grading system

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What are Modifications?

- Working toward a different learning standard
- Less content
 - Responsible for only 3 of 10 concepts in science class
- Parallel curriculum at lower level
 - Working on addition and subtraction story problems instead of multiplication and division
- Usually requires individualized grading

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Modifications and Grading

- Is the student still working toward same learning standard as rest of class?
- Can differentiated assessment be used to assess progress toward standard?
- Are modifications used consistently or selectively?
- How much modification must occur before we consider individualized grading?

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Reaching a Common Understanding

- Clarify the difference between an accommodation and a modification
- Clarify that accommodations should not automatically affect grading
- Clarify that differentiated assessment does not require individualized grading if same standard is addressed

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What Purposes do Grades Serve?

- What purpose do grades serve?
 - Progress toward meeting grade-level standard?
 - Progress on learning objectives for the marking period (could be grade-level or individualized/IEP)?
 - Mastery of content and other measures of how student performed (e.g., level of effort)

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When Should a Grading System be Individualized?

Munk (2003) suggests the following conditions for individualizing a grading system:

- Learner has moderate to severe disability and works in an individualized (parallel) curriculum.
- Learner receives a series of very low or failing grades despite appropriate use of accommodations and modifications.
- Learner could have increased access to, and performance in, the regular curriculum.

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Insufficient Rationale for Individualizing a Grading System

- Learner has an IEP.
- Lack of fidelity in implementing legal accommodations and modifications.
- Learner tries hard!
- Student is failing because of missing work.

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Minimizing the Impact of “Zeroes”

Problem:

- Zeroes (0s) do not reflect amount of learning.
- Missing work can be related to organizational problems related to a learner's disability.
- Teacher may believe that giving zeroes teaches “personal responsibility.” No research supports this notion and the authors experience is that zeroes just further undermine a learner's motivation.

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Minimizing the Impact of “Zeroes”

Strategies to Suggest

- Make sure learner understands late-work policy.
- Allow students to turn in late work for full or partial credit.
- Increase communication regarding assignments and due dates.
- Consider an IEP goal for improving self-monitoring of work completion. Doing so will result in instructional support from teachers.

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Lingering Questions about Individualized Grading Systems

- Should an individualized grading system be used if a student is already receiving a passing or higher grade?
- Who is responsible for implementing special grading procedures?

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What is legal?

- The Office of Civil Rights has indicated that learners without IEPs must be treated the same, with equal access to any special grading procedures.
- Special grading procedures are considered legal accommodations when included in the IEP.
- Permanent report cards or transcripts cannot indicate special education status.
- Advocates should seek updated information on legal decisions regarding grading- interpretations and practices do vary among districts.

(Source: Salend, 2005)

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Approaches to Individualizing the Grading System

Norm-referenced models

- Assign multiple grades, each with a different multiplier weight
- Example: Using a 0-100 scale, assign a score for achievement (% correct), curriculum difficulty (80/100) because work is below grade level), and effort. Divide number of scores for average score and assign grade.

From: Salend, 2005

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Approaches to Individualizing the Grading System

Criterion-Related Alternative

- Usually used as an alternative to letter/number grades
- Can involve criterion checklists or portfolios
- Provide most information to the student, parent, and teachers
- Does not involve comparison with other students

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Changing the Grading Elements

Capture progress on individual goals

- Progress on IEP objectives

Capture proficiency with critical skills

- Proficiency with learning strategies
- Proficiency with assistive technologies

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Changing the Grading Elements

Focusing on critical assignments in regular grading system

- Prioritizing content and related assignments

Motivating students to work hard and use supports

- Capture improvement
- Capture effort

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The PGP Process for Individualizing Grading Systems (Munk, 2003)

- Because there is no single-best approach to individualizing for specific students, a collaborative approach is recommended
- The PGP Process helps teams match grading strategies to student needs
- The PGP Process leads to development of Personalized Grading Plans (PGPs)

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Use with Caution

- Changing the grading scale so that fewer points earns a higher grade
- Changing the weight that certain elements count toward a final grade
- Pass/fail instead of letter grades

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Reporting Grades

- Report both the level of achievement and grade level of work.
Example: A grade of B7D would indicate that the student earned a B average on work from grade 7, last quarter of the year.
- Report only a pass/fail (use with caution)
- Indicate that grade reflects work on individual objectives

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Communicating Progress

Teachers should be expected to:

- Construct a description of the grading system before the marking period begins
- Make sure that students and parents/advocates know what elements count toward the grade
- Make sure parents know whether grades reflect progress on grade-level or individualized standards/content
- Respond to very low or failing grades during, and not after, the marking period

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Recommended Sources

Special education grading:

Munk, D.D. (2003). *Solving the grading puzzle for students with disabilities*. Whitefish Bay, WI: Knowledge by Design

Salend, S.J. (2005). Report card models that support communication and differentiation of instruction. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 37, (4), 28-35.

Salend, S.J. & Duhaney, L.M.G. (2002). Grading students in inclusive settings. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 34, (3), 8-15.

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Recommended Sources

General grading:

Guskey, T. & Bailey, J.M. (2001). *Developing grading and reporting systems for student learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Marzano, R.J. (2000). *Transforming classroom grading*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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Recommended Sources

Related Topics

Welch, A.B. (2000). Responding to student concerns about fairness. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 33, (2), 36-40.

Websites:

Special Connections Project: University of Kansas-
www.specialconnections.ku.edu

Website includes content on grading learners with exceptionalities.

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